

DEVELOPING QUALITY ESSAY QUESTIONS

RULES FOR CONSTRUCTING ESSAY QUESTIONS

- 1. Use essay questions to measure complex learning outcomes only.** The essay test should be reserved for those situations that require the student to *give* reasons, *explain* relationships, *describe* data, *formulate* conclusions, or in some other way produce the appropriate answer. Where supplying the answer is vital, a properly constructed restricted-response question is likely to be most appropriate. At the synthesis and evaluation levels of learning, the essay answer provides unique information.
- 2. Relate the questions as directly as possible to the learning outcomes being measured.** One practical solution is to indicate to the students the criteria (the rubric) to be used in evaluating the answer. For example, a parenthetical statement such as the following might be added: “Your answer will be evaluated in terms of its comprehensiveness, the relevance of its arguments, the appropriateness of its examples, and the skill with which it is organized.” This clarifies the task to the students without limiting their freedom, and makes the item easier to relate to clearly defined learning outcomes.
- 3. Formulate questions that present a clear task to be performed.** Complex achievement is most apt to be called forth by such words as “why,” “describe,” “explain,” “compare,” “relate,” “contrast,” “interpret,” “analyze,” “criticize,” and “evaluate.”
- 4. Provide ample time for answering and suggest a time limit on each questions.** Time must be allowed for thinking as well as for writing and generous time limits should be provided. It may also be desirable to indicate page or word limits. Anything that will clarify the form and scope of the task without interfering with the intended outcomes is likely to contribute to more effective measurement.

[Modified from Gronlund, N.E. (2000). *Assessment of Student Achievement*, 7th Ed. Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon.]

ESSAY QUESTION Checklist

- _____ An essay question is the most appropriate method for measuring the intended learning outcome (e.g., organize, integrate, and express ideas).
- _____ The item task matches the learning task being measured (e.g., “using appropriate examples...”).
- _____ The question measures complex learning outcomes (e.g., “compare,” “analyze,” or “explain”).
- _____ The question makes clear what is being measured and how the answer will be evaluated.
- _____ Terminology clarifies and limits the task (e.g., “describe” not “discuss,” and “in one sentence”).
- _____ Ample time has been allowed for each question.
- _____ The limited sampling and time-consuming scoring of the essay topic is offset by the in-depth information obtained about student understanding.
- _____ The question has clear criteria for evaluating the answer (e.g., scoring key, model answers, or standards).